Canadian Press Clipping Service
481 University Ave.
Toronto 2

Etobicoke Advertiser
Islington, Ont.
June 7, 1978

CANADIAN PRESS CLIPPING SERVICE

Point Talking

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Boro author's first book a must

It is always a pleasure to see the result of a real craftsman's work — it doesn't matter what she's doing, whether it's making a Gateau St. Honore, making a shillelagh out of a bull's penis or writing a book. The result is a work of art. You may not like it for any number of reasons but you admire the fine workmanship and the loving care that has gone into it.

As it happens, I do indeed like Margaret Drury Gane's first novel, recently published by Clarke Irwin and I thought you might like to know something about the book and the author, who lives in Etobicoke. Parade on an empty street (the title is the only thing I dislike about the book) is a gentle, perceptive, evocative story of an ordinary family, if there is such a thing, in Toronto just before the Second World War. However, the locale isn't that important — it's the period.

I was living in England in that time but as I read, I kept coming upon authentic sights and sounds that I recognized from the '30s. Margaret tells me she didn't find it necessary to do much research for the background so she must have excellent recall — all the flavors are there. It's unusual for a woman writer to tell a story from the male viewpoint, especially that of a sensitive, 11-year-old.

It's told in a long flashback, except for a prologue and epilogue, by Keith Gillies whose father works in Eaton's silverware department, and whose pretty, loving, lively mother plays the old piano and stretches the family dollar to provide small treats. There are marvellously gritty, real portraits of the boys Keith chums with, of the principal, Mr. Alder ("stalking us with wintry disdain"), of Critchley-Williams the new teacher from England who has an artificial leg and a real heart. If this were all to the story, it would still be a good read about a time that seems to us now to have been more innocent, kindlier, than it really was.

But what turns this into a compelling story with Gothic overtones is Keith's obsession with an odd girl of his own age who comes to live with her grandmother, Mrs. Upshaw — a warped, violent old woman who drove her son to his execution and now bids fair to destroy Shirley. She's a strange girl, an orphan, afraid of friendship, afraid of her grandmother. She rejects Keith's overtures and protects herself by anger and flight. Her grandmother's insistence on accompanying the girl to school; on old-fashioned and unsuitable clothing; and on isolating her from any contact with other people, is thrown like a stockade around her granddaughter.

It's not just awakening sexuality that drives Keith to befriend Shirley, despite Mrs. Upshaw . . . it's the desire of any decent person to protect something hunted, something fragile.

At the same time, there's an interesting complication in Keith's life; an artist, Durham Stott, comes to stay with the family for several months. He's an old love of Keith's mother and wants her to go away with him, as Keith accidentally overhears. The boy can never bring himself to confront his mother but the knowledge, the fear, gnaws at him for months.

When you have finished reading this story, the people stay with you — they have a powerful existence of their own and you want to know more about Keith and Shirley, Pinky Yorke, Critchley-Williams and the teacher with the watermelon breasts.

There are some delicious comic scenes in the book, especially the ceremony set up by the principal, in the hot playground, to celebrate the outbreak of war, which is complicated by the arrival of Hughie, the street's retarded boy and his bulldog. I hope it won't put anyone off if I say that this is a well-written literate book. The writing flows smoothly sustaining interest and buoyantly tossing up phrases, from time to time, that flash like crystal in the sun and illuminate the moment. For non-writers, the act of writing a book, especially a novel, seems as unnatural and hazardous as crossing Niagara by tightrope — as a matter of fact, that is often how it appears to the writer who is stuck in the middle of Chapter 9, with not another idea in sight.

How do you even begin?

Four years ago Margaret wrote a short story for Chatelaine, which they praised highly but rejected. A painful paradox experienced by most writers. But someone on the staff suggested it would make a good novel, so Margaret wrote Parade over the next 10 months, squeezing time out of looking after her family and her work. The only publisher she sent it to rejected it. Margaret put the book away for a year or so, took it out, dusted it off and sent it out again, it was taken by Clarke Irwin immediately.

Why does one apparently knowledgeable publishing house loathe a book while another perceptive and successful publisher dotes on it? You may ask why the troll didn't eat the Fourth Billy Goat.

I talked to Margaret on the phone — she has a chuckle and is a warm, refreshingly direct person. She has been interested in writing all her life; her mother typed her with an old Remington almost as big as herself when she was seven. She was the only girl in the family and her parents wisely allowed her to climb trees — what she describes as "a free girl" (rather than a free spirit). This experience obviously helped with her characterization of Keith.

It wasn't until six years ago, when she was 40, that she started seriously to write short stories. It took her five years to succeed — and sold the first one almost immediately. This is Margaret Gane's first book (but not mine) and there will be others. It's safe to say that they will all be worth reading because she's a craftsperson (I don't mean a craftsperson) and she also knows how.

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